DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 886 CS 512 421

AUTHOR	Smith, Carl B., Ed.
TITLE	The Importance of Expository Text: Reading and Writing. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	TBC-03007
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., 8140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://eric.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Bibliographies; *Classroom Techniques; *Content Area Reading; Elementary Education; *Expository Writing; Information Literacy; Nonfiction; Reading Skills; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Expository Text; *Information Books; Information Focus

ABSTRACT

Typically, elementary school children read more narrative texts, such as short stories, poems, and fiction books. Some educators have raised concerns over whether elementary school children are developing the skills needed to study the structure and function of expository texts. This topical bibliography and commentary provides examples that show how teachers can incorporate expository text into the school curriculum while making this writing style a rewarding experience for students. The bibliography/commentary notes that expository writing is also considered information literacy since the primary function of this text style is to convey information. It adds that this imbalance between narrative and expository experience has led educators to try to seek methods for closing the gap, and they have found that expository writing can be taught even at an early age. (Contains 2 Internet addresses and 14 references.) (NKA)

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Topical Bibliography and Commentary

2805 E. 10th St. #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
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TBC-03007

ED 480 886

The Importance of Expository Text: Reading and Writing

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Introduction

In language arts classes, students are exposed to narrative and expository texts. Typically, elementary school children read more narrative texts such as short stories, poems, and fiction books. Some educators have raised concern over whether elementary school children are developing the skills needed to study the structure and function of expository texts. This paper will provide examples that show how teachers can incorporate expository text into the school curriculum while making this writing style a rewarding experience for students.

Information Literacy

Expository writing is also considered information literacy since the primary function of this text style is to convey information. Examples of expository texts include nonfiction materials such as textbooks, trade books, and encyclopedias. In the past, the expository selection was often dry and boring for students. Many of these informational books were not geared toward the reading levels of elementary school children. As a consequence, by the time they reached higher grades, students were adept at writing narrative texts such as short stories but lacked the skills necessary to write research papers or other expository works. As Daniels (1990) states, "the writing curriculum experienced by many American students as they go up through the grades is essentially: story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, term paper." This collision with the dreaded term paper is the most dramatic, most worried over, and perhaps the most emblematic demonstration of the "expository gap."

This imbalance between narrative and expository experience has led educators to try to seek methods for closing the gap. They have learned that expository writing can be taught even at an early age, and that essential skills developed early can be cultivated into more sophisticated writing down the road.

Benefits of Expository Writing

Information books help children understand expository text structures such as description, cause and effect, and comparison and contrast. With increased experience reading text of this type, students receive valuable information. Unfortunately, some teachers use textbooks as the sole example of an expository resource. In addition, until recently there were only a few information books geared toward children. As information is presented to children in fun and creative ways, children can develop more sophisticated skills in critical and analytical thinking (Harvey, 2002).

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Another benefit of exposing children to expository writing is the opportunity for them to synthesize material. Children read from a variety of texts to find information on a topic, draw out the main points, and then pull the information together in a report. Children learn how to search for relationships among pieces of information (Moss, Leone & Dipillo, 1997). Educators strongly suggest the use of multiple texts so that children can gather information from several sources to receive varied perspectives and ideas. If a teacher relies on a textbook as the sole expository text, then children are exposed to only one perspective. Palmer & Stewart (1997) maintain that nonfiction provides a powerful alternative to the dominance of a single textbook. Yet, 75% to 90% of U.S. classrooms rely almost exclusively on textbooks even though media, technology, trade books, and primary documents are preferred learning tools. Teachers should encourage students to find information from a variety of sources so that reading, researching, and writing skills will be enhanced.

Reading Exposition

Since older children have identified expository writing as more difficult to read than narrative text, educators encourage teachers to spend more time developing expository skills. Thus, children could benefit from further practice with expository texts. A recent survey of read-aloud practices in 537 elementary classrooms nationwide indicated that none of the most frequently read titles at any grade level were information books (Hoffman, Roser & Battle, 1993). Most of the new literature-based reading programs continue to emphasize narrative at the expense of exposition. In order for students to learn the skills necessary to read, analyze, and write expository examples, they must be equipped with reading strategies to construct meaning from the text. Quiocho (1997) provides an overview of some reading strategies used to increase reading comprehension of expository works.

- GIST (Generating Interactions between Schemata and Text)—when students finish reading a section, they generate a summary sentence for what they have read. Summary sentences create an overview of the entire section of the text and highlight significant ideas (Cunningham, 1982).
- Sketch to Stretch (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988)—as one student reads aloud, other group members listen and draw their perceptions. The basis for this approach is that people interpret readings differently.
- K-W-L (What I know, What I want to learn, What I have learned)—helps students to bring their prior knowledge to the text before they read. Students use butcher paper to keep track of what they learn. The chart also serves as a daily review (Ogle, 1986).
- SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review)—students generate questions and then search for the answers (Robinson, 1946).
- QAR (Question-Answer Relationship)—this strategy focuses on teaching students to locate answers that may be explicit or implicit.
- Mapping and Charting—helps students to organize information into clusters or patterns where associations are made and information is connected.

All of these examples help students to comprehend expository reading material. Students can practice with the various strategies to figure out the technique that works the best.

Writing Exposition

After students have practiced the reading techniques described above, they are then ready to analyze and to synthesize the information. Research clearly indicates the value and importance of linking reading and writing experiences in the classroom. When children or adults write about what they have read, engagement with text is enhanced, recall of key ideas improves, and analysis of text is deeper (Tierney & Shanahan, 1996). Writing about expository text helps learners elaborate on and manipulate ideas.

Patterning is a technique that eases students into the writing of expository text. The teacher helps students identify the pattern within a text structure and then has students model the structure style. By patterning their own work after a known book, children's early written efforts at exposition are scaffolded. Written retellings are another way to connect reading and writing exposition. Written retellings of the expository text provide indications for the comprehension level of the student. Based on the title, students write a sentence or two about what they think the text will be about.
The teacher then reads the text aloud. Students reread the text as many times as they wish. They then retell the story and share the retellings with other students.

Two-column journals can also increase reading and writing of expository texts. In two-column journals, children note text-based information of interest on the left side of the page. On the right side of the page, they record personal feelings about the information (Aliki, 1993).

What they said:	What I think:
The aquarium is full of fish and they are alive.	I never knew there were so many different kinds of fish, some look fake but are real.

Incorporating Exposition in the Classroom

Teachers can structure a variety of situations to help expose students to expository texts. Classroom novels can be used as springboards to the exploration of information (Nimon, 2000). This uses the inquiry approach to learning. Based on the reading, students ask questions. Such questions create a need to know which could lead to exploring additional books to find the information. This branching out of reading material gives students a more enriched information base. As long as students are encouraged to ask questions, the possibilities for expository readings are limitless.

In addition, teachers can encourage the use of expository writings that complement textbooks. After a topic is studied in a textbook, students can study in more detail a topic of interest. If children are to become familiar with well-written exposition, they must have up-to-date information trade books available in the classroom. These information books should have a wide range of topics and encompass different levels of difficulty. Moss (1994) suggests that book selection be made on the five A's: a) authority of the author; b) the accuracy of the content; c) the appropriateness of the book for children; d) the literary artistry; e) the appearance of the book. It is important to note that a book does not have to be an exclusively expository work. Increasingly, combinations of narrative and exposition are used to make books more enjoyable and informative for children.

Conclusion

Expository texts primarily provide information to students in a non-narrative form. Traditionally, elementary students have not been trained to recognize examples of expository writings. As teachers introduce students to reading strategies, this will help to maximize reading comprehension. By reading and writing expository texts, children will develop a deeper understanding of exposition and will become more comfortable in writing this style. Through this experience, children develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for expository works, and they are able to practice the critical and analytical skills necessary for success in the Information Age (Allen, 1999).

Internet Resources

Expository Text: The Choice for Some, A Challenge for Others
http://fp3e.adhost.com/big6/enewsletter/archives/spring00/pages.html

Selection of Nonfiction Materials for Elementary Students
http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/nonfic.htm

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ERIC TBC #03007 was published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Tel. 1-800-759-4723. Full text at: http://eric.indiana.edu. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary summaries are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. This project is funded at least in part with Federal funds from the US Department of Education under contract ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government.

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